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SUBJECT: U/S LARSON MEETING WITH AFGHAN MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS ABDULLAH ABDULLAH

11. (SBU) U/S Larson met with Afghan Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah on the margins of the World Economic Forum (WEF) on Saturday, May 15. Larson asked Abdullah to review the latest draft of the G-8 plan of support for reform. After handing over a copy, Larson outlined the scope of the initiative and stressed that regional input was key to make this G-8 effort a success. Larson praised Education Minister Dr. Ghani's willingness to serve as one of the chairs of the literacy reform program. Larson informed Abdullah that he would be meeting with his G-8 counterparts in the next few days to shape the initiative and it was crucial that he consult with all countries interested in participating. He added that it was particularly critical for President Karzai, an advocate for reform in the region who has agreed to endorse the initiative at Sea Island, to have a full understanding of the programs.

12. (SBU) Abdullah commented that he had a sense of the regional view on the initiative but wanted to know how the other G-8 partners viewed it. Larson said that his G-8 partners were largely supportive but some have raised questions over the region's willingness to commit to some of the programs, particularly democracy. Larson said that the contacts the USG has made suggest that participants were at the WEF to confirm regional views. As long the program is perceived as a genuine offer to support those countries who would like assistance, and not as a one-size-fits-all prescription, the program will have the support of the region.

13. (SBU) Abdullah suggested that the region will be ready if it hears the right noises. He went on offer a word of caution. The main allies of this package are the intellectuals in the region and because of recent developments and perceptions, their support may be waning. It is critical that the USG find a people to people mechanism to insure that you do not lose this valuable support base. Larson replied that the USG is working to deepen these ties.

14. (SBU) Larson turned the conversation toward a discussion on Afghan priorities. Abdullah answered by saying that the Afghan people are facing some of the same kind of challenge - perception - that the U.S. faces in the region. Abdullah recounted a discussion that he had with the Saudis last week, in which they had suggested that the Afghan people are not ready for democracy and granting rights to women. He had told the Saudis that democracy is the wish of the Afghan people and that they as a democracy had decided to proceed. Despite these differences, Larson assured Abdullah that the USG would work with the Gulf countries to insure that they are willing to provide the political and economic support Kabul needs over the coming years. Abdullah conceded that his government has not made a sufficient effort to woo the Persian Gulf donors, but said that it understands that it must do a better job and is trying to do so. He cited, as one example, a proposal from government of Qatar for an irrigation project.

15. (SBU) Moving the donor discussion the next step, Larson probed for Afghan efforts into tapping the private sector. He mentioned that he had met with several members of the Arab Business Council the previous night, who recognize that there is great opportunity in Afghanistan, as a hub for business and trade in the region. Abdullah agreed saying that at an Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) meeting last week, the 11 members agreed that they must overcome their differences to push economic development forward. Abdullah agreed that he must pursue not only the private sector and must also tap into nongovernmental organizations to provide technical assistance to the public sector.

16. (U) This message was cleared by Under Secretary Larson.

17. (U) Kabul minimize considered.
GNEHM